A STUDY COMBINING STONEWARE AND FOUND OBJECTS

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Otis Michael Grafa
Denton, Texas
December, 1975

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The intention of this study is to examine the relationship between fired clay and certain found objects. Working from the assumption that clay, being a natural substance, shares a common ground with certain other natural substances, such as wood, hemp, rock, etc., a primary aspect of the investigation consists of discovering successful combinations of these materials. Both glazed and unglazed ceramic pieces are combined with the found objects. In each design two subordinate problems were encountered. These were (1) determining the best means of combining and preserving objects in a semi-permanent state and (2) ascertaining whether the thrown form is by itself visually satisfying or if it would be improved by distortion.

Because the spectrum of natural objects and the possible combinations proved unmanageably broad, the experimentation was limited mainly to combining clay forms with rope and wood. Only thrown ceramic pieces were used as I prefer this method of forming clay to any other. Only one clay body was used and the throwing was done on an electric wheel.

Ideas for this experimentation began during a period when I was studying painting at the University of Texas at

Austin. During this time I was influenced by the work of Robert Rauschenberg as a result of extensive examination of slides and illustrations of his work as well as related bound material. Particularly influential was Rauschenberg's ability to combine seemingly unrelated objects to create another more visually expressive object. The pieces Rauschenberg created by this method and the objects he utilized seemed for the most part to reflect what he saw around him. The reason that Rauschenberg, more so than other contemporary artists, had such an influential effect on me is that he seemed to incorporate his own basic design principles into a strong, visual statement; he seemed equally concerned with the visual quality of his work and the quality of his statement.

Before going to the University of Texas at Austin, I had received a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at Texas University and had intentions of becoming a painter. While in Austin I moved into a house which had "forgotten things" of great interest to me stored underneath it. This became the source of my found objects, and I decided to do a series of paintings combining various of these objects for a painting class I was taking at the time. In the course of the series, I studied several of Rauschenberg's early works; I was subsequently influenced by them. Also during this time period I was making pots to support myself, but I had never tried to relate my painting to my pottery. This study

has grown from my attempts to do this.

These experiences provide the basis for the major reasons that led me to the experimentation with the process of integrating ropes, clay, and wood into visually pleasing pieces which is described in detail in the remaining chapters of this paper.

CHAPTER II

PROCESS

The process of producing the forms studied here consists of preparing the clay, making the basic round clay form, changing that form, firing, glazing, and completing the combination of materials. All the ceramic forms were made from a clay which consisted of the following ingredients:

100 lbs. Hawthorn Bond fire clay
50 lbs. Kentucky Old Mine 4 ball clay
10 lbs. medium weight grog
10 lbs. heavy weight grog
2 lbs. iron oxide

Fire clay is the main ingredient in the mixture. It gives strength and durability to the mixture and enables the finished piece to withstand the high temperatures without melting or being deformed. The ball clay adds plasticity to the clay body, and the small amount of impurities in the ball clay combined with the red iron oxide makes the clay body mature at the proper temperature for fiting and changes the color of the fired clay body from a warm tan to a reddish tan. Grog is fire clay that has been fired to its maturing point and then ground into different size particles. This

substance gives strength to the clay during the throwing process, helps the clay to dry more evenly, and prevents warping. The clay was mixed in a mixer similar to a mortar mixer and put through a pug mill to take out as much air as possible and further mix the clay to workable consistency.

In the process used here, the clay is first wedged using the Japanese shell spiral method. (Fig. 1) I prefer this method of wedging because it eliminates air pockets and produces the most homogenous mass; another advantage of this method lies in the fact that the resulting parallel alignment of the clay particles to the spiral motion of the wheel facilitates the throwing process. Following this procedure, approximately 25 pounds of clay are centered on an electric wheel. (See Fig. 2) Centering is a process of manually arranging the clay in a perfect cylindrical shape in the same direction as that of the revolving wheel head. A hole is then opened in the center of the form. (See Fig. 3) A cylinder is pulled up and collared; after collaring, the cylinder is repulled, thus making the walls thinner. (See Figs. 4, 5, & 6) For readers unfamiliar with terms used in this chapter, a glossary of terms has been included in the appendix.

Once the cylinder is formed, it is then spread out, making a more bulbous form. (See Fig. 7) The bulbous form is the closed at the top and scraped to a smooth finish.

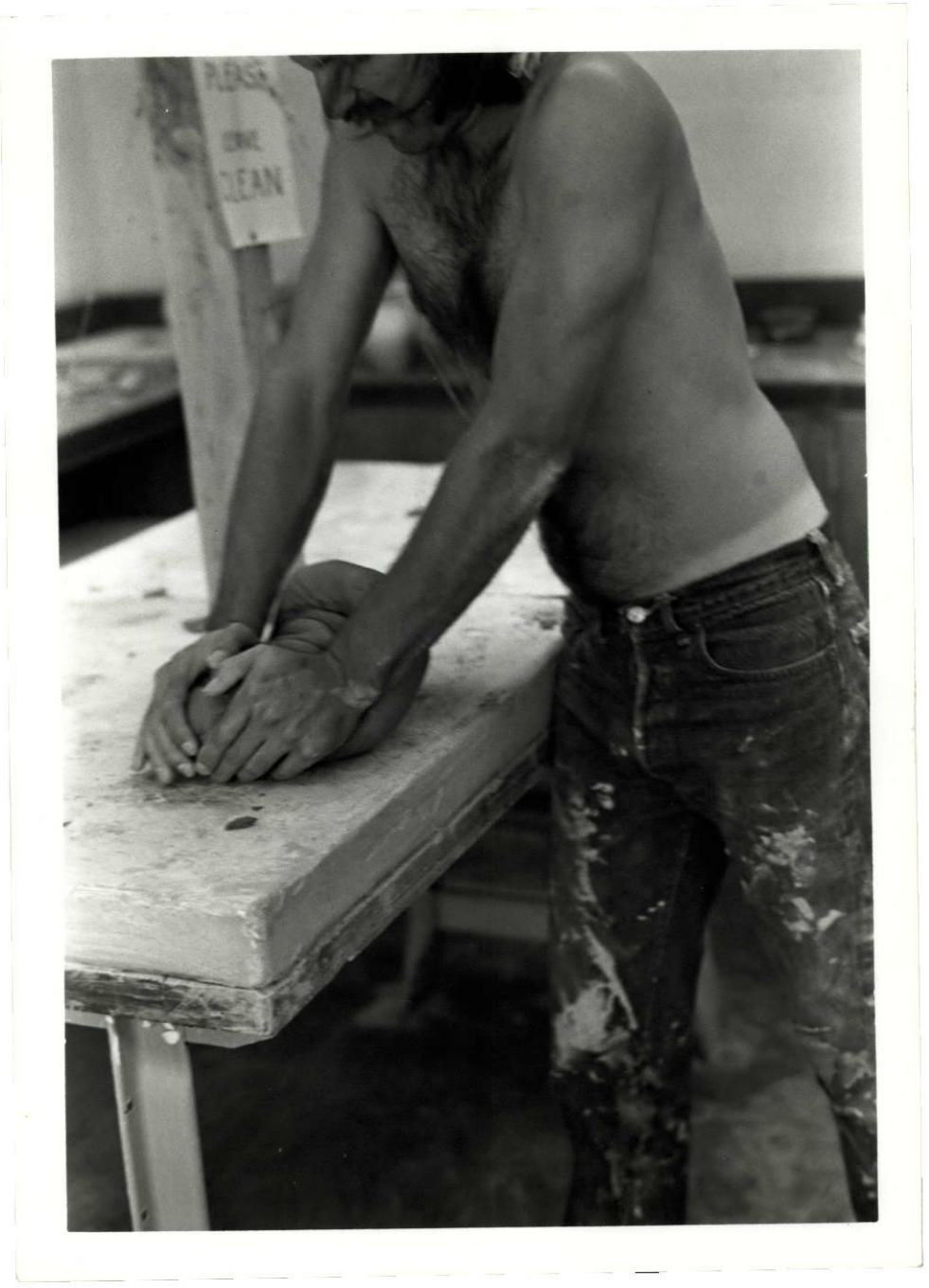

Fig. 1--Wedging

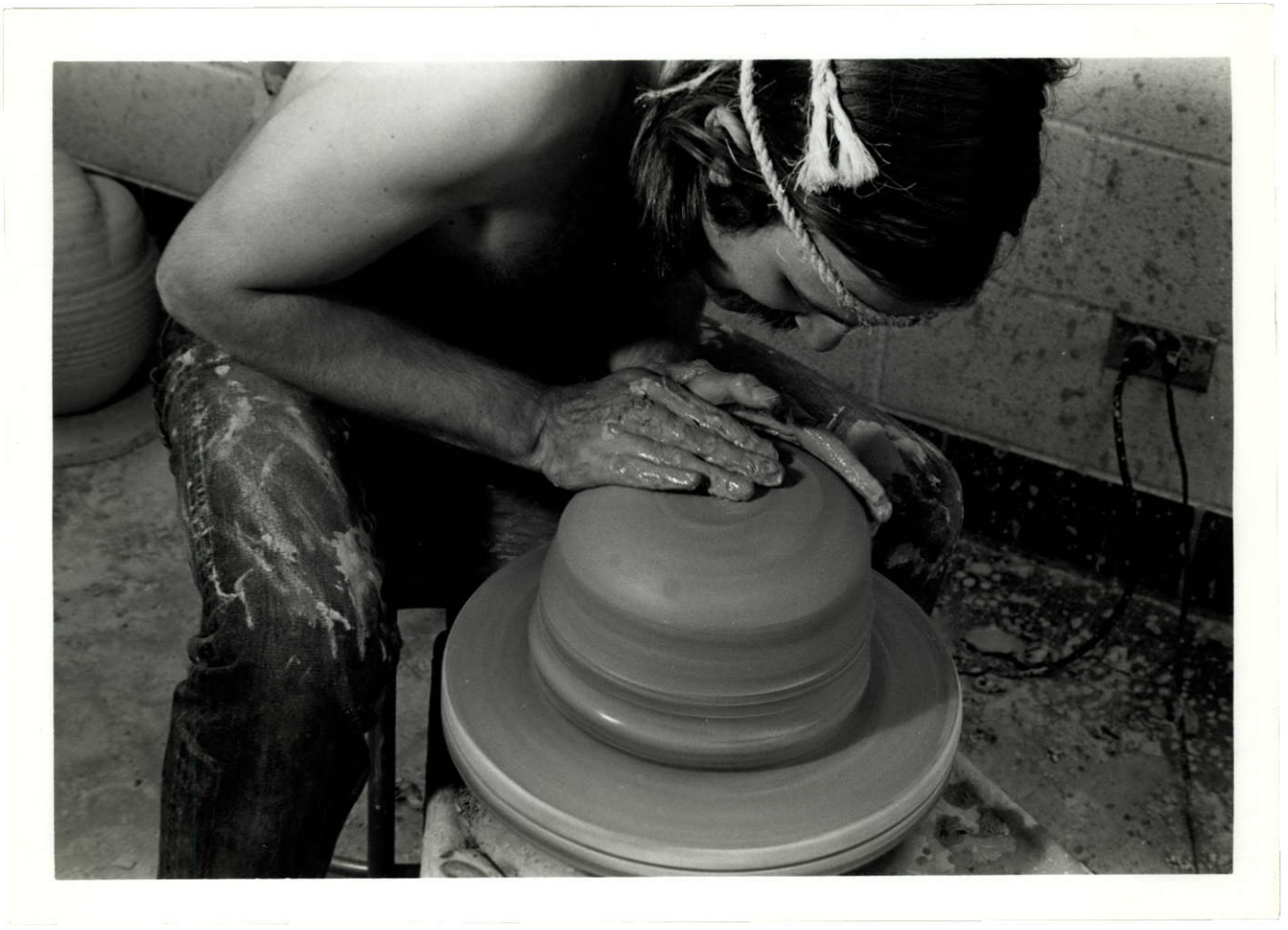

Fig. 2--Centering

Fig. 3--Forming of Center Hole

Fig. 4--Forming of Cylinder

Fig. 5--Collaring

Fig. 6--Pulling

Fig. 7--Spreading of Cylinder Form

(See Figs. 8 & 9) The closing of the hole entraps air in the pot which allows pressure to be exerted on the outside without causing the form to collapse. After closing the hole, the top is then refined to the desired curve, (See Fig 10) and the curve of the base is corrected. (See Fig. 11)

When satisfied with the curves at the top and the base, I distorted the then symmetrical pot through a process which utilizes ropes. Ropes, which are used in some way on each piece, are placed randomly around the post, mostly parallel to the wheel head so as not to disturb the manner in which the pot sets, and then gently tightened, thus creating deep grooves and resulting in an asymmetrically shaped pot. (See Figs. 12, 13, 14, & 15) Care must be taken not to pull the ropes too tightly or the piece will collapse.

All the pieces for this investigation were made in this way except for Piece #4 (See Fig. 18) which was thrown as a plate form and distorted with my fingers on the edge.

The only pieces that are not shown in this investigation are those which either collapsed during the throwing process or were destroyed in the firing process. Data concerning the success or failure of each piece was recorded immediately after each piece was finished. Suggestion for making the piece more successful were carried through on the succeeding piece.

The firing process, which was accomplished in an Alpine updraft 20 cubic foot natural gas kiln, consists of two

Fig. 8--Scraping Method

Fig. 9--Closing of Cylinder

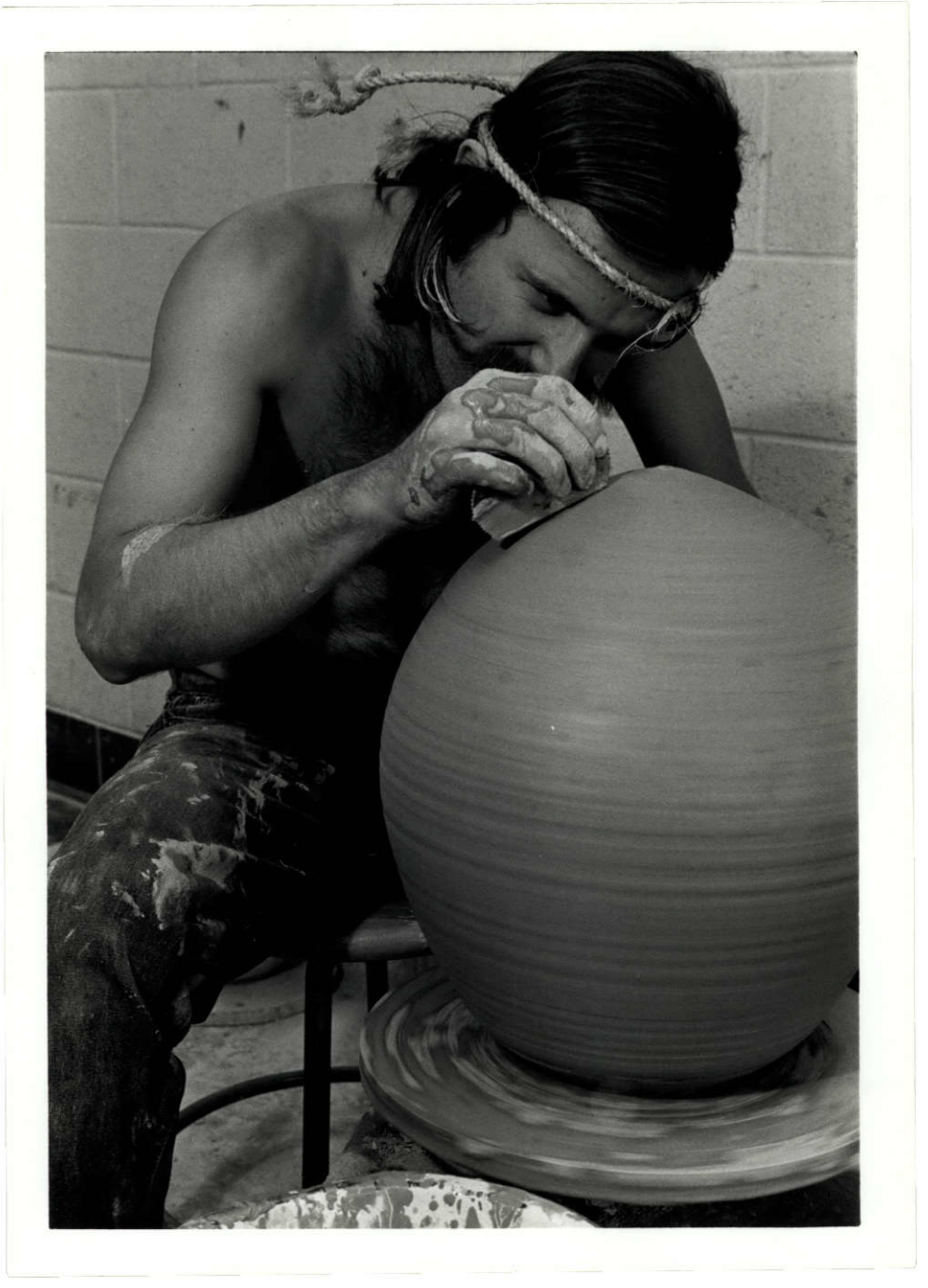

Fig. 10--Refining of Curve

Fig. 11--Correction of Base Curve

Fig. 12--Distortion by Roping

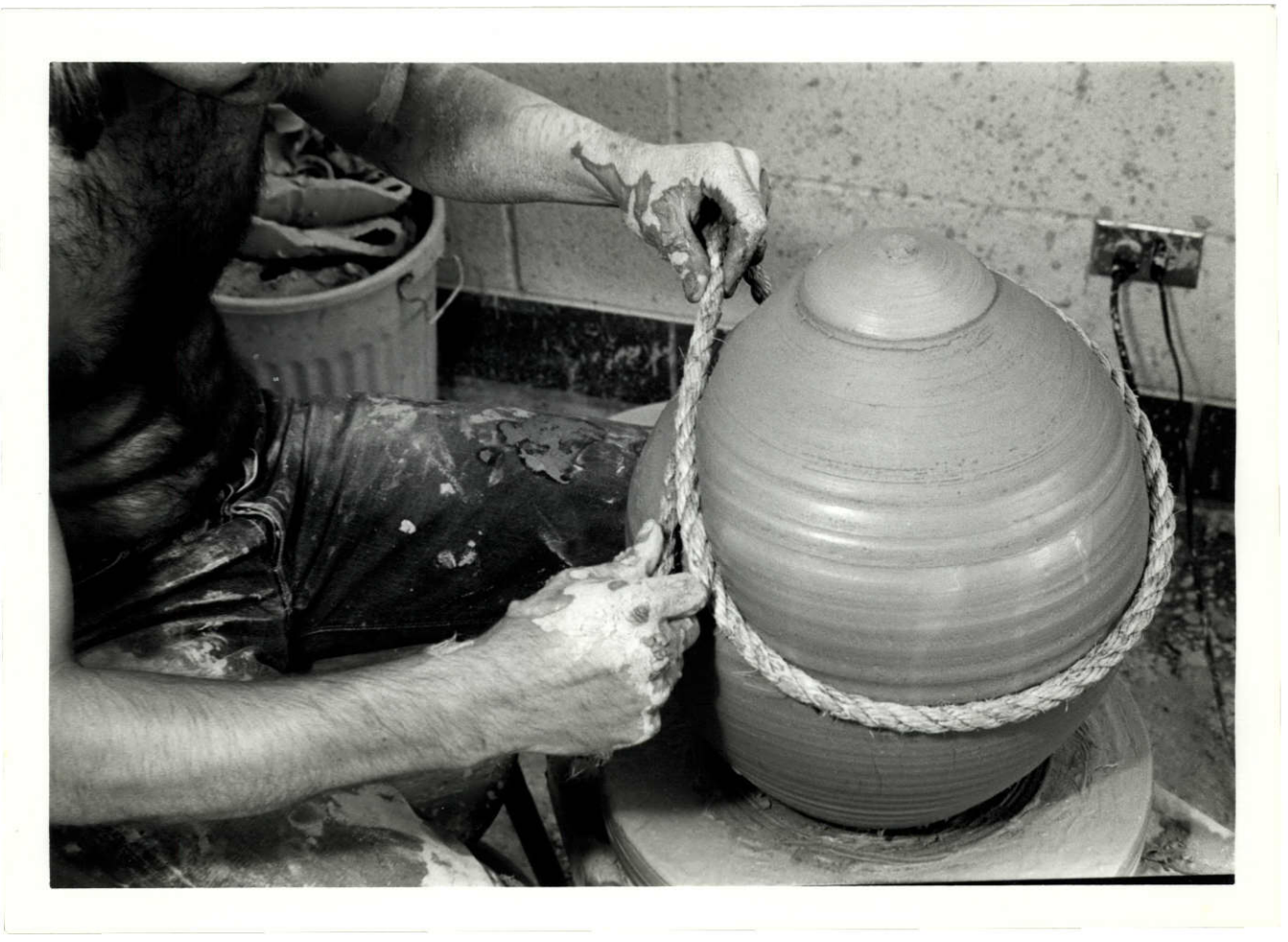

Fig. 13--Distortion by Roping

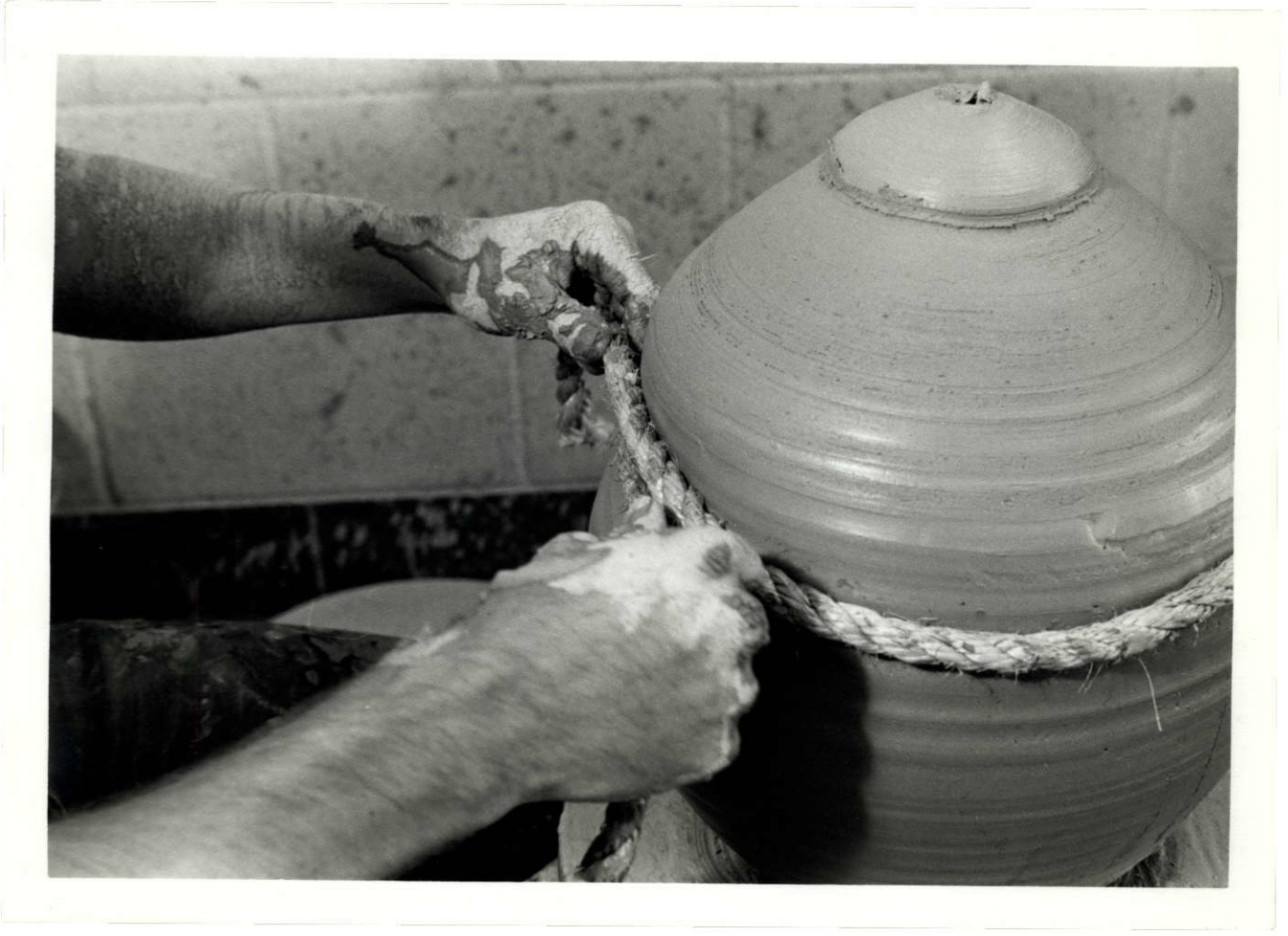

Fig. 14--Distortion by Roping

stages: bisque firing and glaze firing. The purpose of bisque firing is to make the piece easier to handle and less prone to breakage; bisque firing is a preliminary firing done at a much lower temperature than the final or glaze firing. In glaze firing the piece is heated to a point at which the glaze fuses together, becoming essentially a glass-like structure over a clay structure, and the clay and glaze achieve a type of fusion.

CHAPTER III

DESCRIPTION OF PIECES

This chapter is devoted to a description of the pots produced as a result of the experimentation. Each piece in this series was either distorted by the use of ropes while on the wheel or was combined with rope or wood to extend the visual interest of the piece. I usually planned one pot at a time. As I finished one piece, I would look at it objectively and decide how the idea might be improved in the next piece. I would then proceed to do the next pot taking into consideration what I had learned from the previous piece.

Piece #1 was first thrown to see what rope and clay would look like together on the same piece. (See Fig. 15) Holes were cut in the top portion of the pot to help relate the rope to the pot or to create a place for the rope to integrate physically as well as visually into the pot. The pot was left unglazed except for an iron stain; the reason for doing this was to create a closer relationship between the color of the rope and the color of the pot. The stain was applied in such away as to slightly echo the lines made by the rope. The ropes were left long enough to extend out onto the floor, making the pot set better and adding visual

Fig. 15--Piece No. 1

Fig. 16--Piece No. 2

interest. The ropes in this piece seemed to make some of the spaces around the form more obvious and to add contrast to the inward curve; they created negative spaces that complemented the negative spaces on the pot created by the iron stain. However, partly because of the fact that the ropes were joined to the pot in such a way as to interfere with the lid, this pot was not aesthetically pleasing.

For Piece #2 the shape of the pot was changed from an inward curve to an outward curve. (See Fig. 16) The purposes for the change was to furnish a form around which the rope could fit, rather than having the rope hang free. Impressions of the rope left in the side of the pot add tectural interest to this piece and result in integrating the rope and the pot both visually and physically. On this piece, the basic shape of the pot is relatively unchanged by the rope. Iron stain plays a role here in emphasizing the impressed texture and path of the rope. A white glaze was poured over the entire pot to force a contrast with the dark stain of the rope. The ropes were again allowed to trail onto the floor, emphasizing that this is a piece which is meant to set on a solid surface. The grooves that the ropes created made interesting bulges which broke up the severe symmetrical shape of the clay form. The ropes and the iron stain created a nice contrast which added interest to the piece. Again I found weaknesses with this pot; there

was no visual excitement; the glaze was distracting and seemed too much of a contrast with rope.

Therefore, in my next piece I eliminated the glaze and made a more rounded shape than in Piece #2. (See Fig. 17) The rounded shape was used so that when the ropes were pulled around the form very pronounced bulges would result. The ropes were pulled tightly around the form while still wet, further distorting the form and increasing the visual excitement of the bulges. No glaze or stain was used on this piece, both for the sake of simplicity and to heighten the contrast between the clay and the rope. As in the aforementioned pieces, and for the same reasons, the ropes in this piece were allowed to trail onto the surface. However, the fact that the ropes were still in so much contrast with the unglazed surface is a weakness in this piece.

Piece #4 (See Fig. 18) differs from the previously described pieces in its use of suspended rather than placed forms and its concern with the environment of the clay form. In other pieces, the ropes, by trailing off the clay form, make the viewer more aware of the negative space or the air around the pot than if the ropes were not there. The function of the ropes is to define the environment of the piece and to effect a type of frame around parts of the air and the pot. In Piece #4, the ropes pay a more functional part than in the previous pieces, and this, in my opinion,

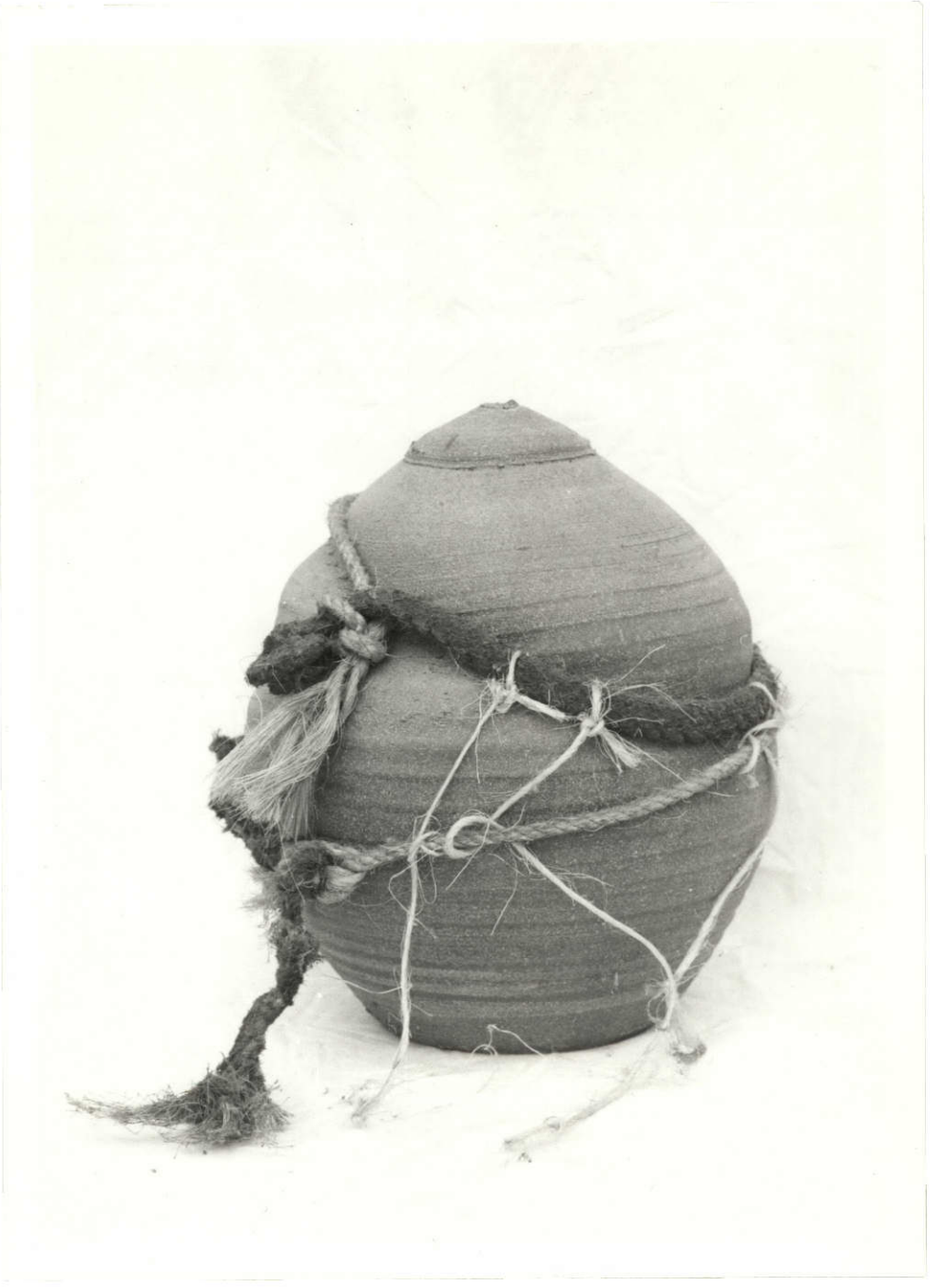

Fig. 17--Piece No. 3

Fig. 18--Piece No. 4

Fig. 19--Piece No. 5

Fig. 20--Piece No. 6

gives them a reason to be there. In this piece both the clay form and the ropes have a part to play, and the result is a more totally unified piece. The ropes play an important part in dealing with the space surrouding the clay form and at the same time create a tension point between the piece and the surface above which the piece is suspended. The use of the ropes in this manner accomplished two things: It created visual interest through the use of tension and suspension and it did away with the necessity of situating the form on a flat surface. The ropes were tied in an asymmetrical but slightly distorted clay form. The only criticism I have of this piece is that the plate set awkwardly in its harness in the ropes.

The idea of creating an environment for the thrown forms, begun in Piece #4 was pursued further in Piece #5. (See Fig. 19) This piece uses a wooden board suspended by ropes as a platform for the clay forms; the symmetrical forms of the clay were used as contrast against the organic form of the rope. In Piece #5 ropes were not used to distort the clay forms. As a result of the distance maintained between the ropes and the clay surface in this piece, the contrast between the ropes and the clay surface was less obvious and more pleasing; a much more subtle relationship was achieved.

In piece #6 (See Fig. 20) the idea of an environment was carried still further in that the clay forms were used to create an environment for the ropes and the ropes were

used to create and environment for the clay forms. Unity was the controlling idea for this piece and both asymmetry and contrast were sacrificed to this end. For the same reason, the pieces were left unglazed, avoiding contrast and giving a totality of feeling to the piece as a whole. The thrown forms used in this piece are similar in shape but not in size, giving a variety that keep the total piece from becoming monotonous. The main weakness of this piece is its impermanence and the awkwardness of the rope placement which renders it almost impossible to be moved from place to place without falling apart.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

From the standpoint of experimentation, the study was valuable to me both for establishing definite aesthetic preferences and for adapting and improving my technique of throwing. In the end, however, I was not completely satisfied with the individual pieces which I produced in completing this study.

While I prefer to work with glazed objects depending more on color than the texture of the clay, I discovered through this investigation that unglazed pots combine better with other objects, such as ropes, than do glazed ones. The reason for this, I believe, is that one result of glazing a pot is to set it off from the rest of its environment while an unglazed piece is better able to blend with its surroundings. In this experiment where ceramic forms were combined with other objects, the ability of the pot to integrate and to relate to the other objects is of paramount importance.

The main reason I was not satisfied with these pieces was that the separate parts, which had considerable compositional merits in themselves, did not contribute sufficiently to the unity of the whole piece. The ropes and boards, for instance, described pleasing shapes in themselves but did not

contribute a unifying element to the total effect in any of the pieces.

As a functional potter, a totally unglazed surface bothers me even if it does work better visually in combination with ropes and wood. I find that the surface of a glazed pot has more visual excitement than does an unglazed one.

The last piece (Piece #6, Fig. 20) where the three forms were placed on their sides with ropes intertwined is the most successful piece visually. Yet the troublesome aspect of this (and all the pieces) is the impermanence.

Since I am a functional potter, I value permanence more than a temporary visual effect. From a visual aspect some of the pieces broken during the work were probably more visually expressive of the action of the rope on them. These I discarded because they had lost their container function. I think it is this conflict between function (the piece working as some sort of container) and the visual action of the ropes distorting the clay form that was most disconcerting to me.

Two techniques which I used in these experiments could be of interest to potters with other design problems. These are the use of ropes for distorting the pot while on the wheel and the practice of completely closing the top of the bottle form when initially thrown. In the first instance, the use of ropes to distort the shape of the pot is a good

method to achieve an asymmetrical form which is sometimes more visually interesting than a symmetrical one. The indentation left by the ropes may add visual excitement to the finished piece. One of the most important findings of this study was that when the initial bottle shape is thrown and completely closed, the air trapped inside will enable one to do further shaping without having the form collapse from the top. While not original with me, this technique proved valuable in finishing the top curve of a rounded bottle. In the pieces prepared for this study I came to prefer the scraping marks left by the process of refining the top curve of such a bottle to the markes left by throwing.

Problems arose during this study which rendered the results not completely satisfactory to me for several reasons. First of all, there is very little one can do to clay after it has been fired. Firing makes it very difficult to attach things to it afterwards unless one has planned for it. I find that it is inconsistent with my working habits to plan that precisely; I depend a great deal on happy accidents and this way of working severely limits that occurence. I think that if I were to continue trying to integrate mixed materials, I would have to "set the stage", so to speak, for more happy accidents to happen so that I could react more spontaneously to the piece. In the future I would like to work more with engobes under clear glazes since most of the creating is done on the wet piece and from then on it is mainly a matter of

solving the technical problems.

Aside from the technical problems, this investigation revealed to me that this was not a direction which resulted in a personal satisfaction with the end product. There was much difficulty in achieving unity from the combination of pots, ropes, and boards; they would not successfully integrate one with another. The relationship between the clay body and the texture of the rope was unsatisfactory. Finally, the creation of visual interest, which was the primary aim in distorting the clay pieces with ropes, was not achieved to the desired degree.

APPENDIX

Ball clay-- A light burning clay of high plasticity and small particle size.

Bisque firing-- Initial firing without a glaze at a temperature of around 1800 F.

Centering-- The alignment of a ball of clay on a rotating wheel into a perfect cylindrical shape.

Collaring-- Reducing the diameter of the neck of a clay form, when throwing on the wheel, by pressing in with both hands.

Fire clay-- Any clay which resists fusion or deformation at temperatures of up to 1800 F.

Glaze firing-- Secondary firing where the glaze melts into a glasslike structure and the clay body fuses together.

Grog-- Clay which has been fired and then ground into granules of relative fineness.

Pug mill-- A machine which forces the clay through a chamber with a revolving screw.

Throwing-- The process of making ceramic shapes by hand on a revolving wheel.

Wedge-- To knead or mix plastic clay by cutting or rolling.

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